

LESSON 9

Voice

9.1. English

Both in classical Greek and in modern English, Voice is a function of the verb including not only finite forms of the verb but also Infinitives (verbal nouns) and Participles (verbal adjectives). In English, there are two Voices: Active and Passive. The Active forms are simple, being expressed by a single form of a verb; Passive forms are compound, being expressed with the help of auxiliary verbs.

*He **had** a good time.* (Act.)

*A good time **was had** by all.* (Pass.)

Active verbs may be used transitively or intransitively, that is, with or without a direct Object.

*He **turned the handle** of the lounge-room door.* (Transitive)

*I **turned**, and saw below*

The same shape twisted on the banister ... (Intr.) (T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*, III.2–3.)

The (grammatical) Subject *performs* the action expressed by an Active form of a verb. The Subject *experiences* (suffers, receives) the action expressed by a Passive form of a verb.

*The **hoplite hurled** his spear with all his strength.* (Act.)

*The **first spear was hurled** by a hoplite in the front rank.* (Pass.)

9.2. Greek

In the classical period of Ancient Greek, there are three Voices of the verb: Active, Middle and Passive. The forms and functions of the Active Voice are relatively straightforward and will not be treated further here. In most

Tenses of the Indicative, there are not separate forms for the Middle and Passive Voices. The function of such forms needs to be determined in each context. An expressed Agent is a pointer to a Passive function: ‘The spear **is hurled by** a hoplite’.

Separate forms for Middle and Passive Voices do occur in the Future and Past Aorist Tenses of the Indicative Mood, and likewise for the Aorist Subjunctive and Optative, and for the Intensive (‘Fut.’) Optative.

παύσομαι, *I shall stop* (Intr.) (Mid.); παυ(σ)θήσομαι, *I shall be stopped* (Pass.).

ἔπαυσάμην, *I stopped* (Intr.) (Mid.); ἐπαύ(σ)θην, *I was stopped* (Pass.).

In English, it is not appropriate to apply the category of Voice to verbs such as ‘to be’, ‘to become’, ‘to seem’, which may have a (Subjective) Complement. The same restriction would apply to εἶναι in Greek. But the status of γίγνεσθαι and δοκεῖν is not simply equivalent to that of εἶναι; γίγνεσθαι has a mixture of Active, Middle and Passive forms; δοκεῖν means ‘to think’ as well as ‘to seem’.

9.3. Uses of the Middle Voice

9.3.1. In General

The Middle Voice expresses greater interest or involvement of the Subject in the action of the verb than would be expressed by the Active Voice.

αἶρεῖν (Act.)	<i>to take</i>
αἶρεῖσθαι (Mid.)	<i>to take for oneself, to choose</i>

Often verbs of emotion, thought and perception are used especially or solely in the Middle Voice.

αἰδεῖσθαι	<i>to be ashamed</i>
νοεῖσθαι	<i>to think</i>
αἰσθάνεσθαι	<i>to perceive</i>

Likewise, verbs denoting bodily activity.

οἶχεσθαι	<i>to go, to have gone</i>
ἔπεσθαι	<i>to follow</i>

Similar to the last two groups are Active verbs which use the Middle Voice in the Future Tense only, without any distinction of meaning.

ἀκούειν, ἀκούσεσθαι	<i>to hear, to be going to hear (perception)</i>
βαίνειν, βήσεσθαι	<i>to walk, to be going to walk (physical activity)</i>

9.3.2. Causative

In the following example, Croesus caused the action of ‘making’ to take place but did not himself ‘make’ the image of the lion.

ἔποιέετο δὲ καὶ λέοντος εἰκόνα ... (Hdt. 1.50.3.)
*And he **had** an image of a lion **made** also ...*

But this causative force may also be expressed by the Active Voice. In the following example, the Subject (Artaphrenes) causes something to be done but does not personally execute the Persians.

τούτων δὲ γενομένων φανερῶν ἀπέκτεινε ἐνθαῦτα πολλοὺς Περσέων ὁ Ἄρταφρένης. (Hdt. 6.4.)

*And when <the identity of> these men became known, Artaphrenes promptly **had** many of the Persians **put to death**.*

9.3.3. Reflexive

The Middle Voice in itself may have a reflexive force.

... καὶ ἐκ τῶν δένδρων τινὲς ἀπήγχοντο ... (Th. 3.81.3.)
*... and some **hanged themselves** from the trees ...*

The stock example of this use is λούομαι, ‘I wash myself’. But here the force may rather be ‘I wash’ (Intr.), in the sense ‘I have a wash’, ‘I am having a wash’. Likewise with many other such Middle forms.

A definitely reflexive construction is more often expressed by an Active verb with a reflexive pronoun as direct Object.

ἐπαινέσαντες γὰρ πολλὰ **ἑαυτοῦς** οὐδαμοῦ ἀντεῖπον ὡς οὐκ ἀδικοῦσι τοὺς ἡμετέρους ξυμμάχους καὶ τὴν Πελοπόννησον· (Th. 1.86.1.)

*For although **praising themselves** at length, they nowhere denied that they were maltreating our allies and the Peloponnese.*

However, this Transitive construction may also occur with a verb in the Middle Voice.

... οὐδὲ **ἔσεγράψαντο ἑαυτοῦς** οὔτε ἐς τὰς Ἀθηναίων σπονδὰς οὔτε ἐς τὰς Λακεδαιμονίων. (Th. 1.31.2.)

*... nor <had> **they enrolled themselves** either in the treaty with the Athenians or in that with the Spartans.*

9.3.4. Reciprocal

A reciprocal use of the Middle Voice has often been proposed.

... οἱ ἀθληταὶ ἠγωνίζοντο ... (Th. 1.6.5.)
... *the contestants used to compete (with one another) ...*

In the context of this example, however, Thucydides is discussing continuity and change in social practice, including clothing in general and for sport. He is not making a point about competition, mutuality or reciprocity. Moreover, ἀγωνίζεσθαι is used only in the Middle and occasionally the Passive (usually Perf. Pass.) Voices throughout the ancient period (apart from the Act. in an inscription of uncertain date).

μάχεσθαι (only Middle), ‘to fight (with one another)’ is also cited as an example of reciprocal use of the Middle Voice. But πολεμεῖν, which has a similar meaning, is not used in the Middle but only in the Active Voice apart from a few Passive instances.

Some verbs are used in both Active and Middle Voices without any significant difference regarding reciprocity.

καὶ περ χωόμενος παύθη χόλου, ὃν πρὶν ἔχεσκεν

οὔνεκ’ **ἐρίζετο** βουλὰς ὑπερμενείῃ Κρονίωι. (Hes. *Th.* 533–534; Middle.)

Although being angry he [= Zeus] ceased from the anger, which he previously had

*because he [= Prometheus] **contended** in his designs **with** the mighty son of Kronos.*

παύθη has no augment.

νόον γε μὲν οὐ τις ἔριζε
τάων ἄς θνηταὶ θνητοῖς τέκον εὐνηθεῖσαι. (Hes.Sc. 5–6; Active.)

*And indeed in intellect there **contended with** <her> no one of the <girls>, whom mortal women when brought to bed bore to mortal men.*

The Middle Voice of some verbs compounded with *διά* and *σύν* is often assigned a reciprocal force.

ἐγὼ γὰρ ὑπεθέμην οὐχ ὡς περὶ τῶν πολιτειῶν **διαλεξόμενος**, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐπιδείξω τὴν πόλιν ἡμῶν πολὺ πλείονος ἄξιαν Λακεδαιμονίων περὶ τοὺς Ἑλληνας γεγενημένην. (Isoc. 12.112.)

*For I proposed <my topic> not in order to **have a discussion** about constitutions, but in order to show that our city had been worth much more than <that> of the Spartans with regard to the Greeks.*

In this example, however, any suggestion of reciprocity or mutual involvement may be due to the prefix as much as to the Middle Voice of *δια-λεξόμενος*.

A genuinely reciprocal expression is more clearly formed by the reciprocal pronoun as Object of an Active verb (or as another component of the predicate).

ἔφερον γὰρ ἀλλήλους τε καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσοι ὄντες οὐ θαλάσσιοι κάτῳ ὄκουν. (Th. 1.7.)

*For **they used to plunder each other** and as many of the rest as, although not being seagoing, lived on the coast.*

However, the reciprocal pronoun may also be used with the Middle Voice. *ἔφερον* (Act.) and *ἐλήζοντο* (Mid.) are synonymous in the preceding and following sentences.

ἐλήζοντο δὲ καὶ κατ' ἠπείρου ἀλλήλους. (Th. 1.5.3.)
*And **they used to plunder each other** on the mainland also.*

In short, it is not clear that there is a specifically reciprocal use of the Middle Voice. Rather, in some contexts some verbs may be used in the Active Voice with the reciprocal pronoun, or in the Middle Voice with or without the reciprocal pronoun, to express reciprocity. The Middle Voice is used in a general way in such contexts to convey the interest or involvement of the Subject.

9.4. The Development of the Middle Voice

It is generally, but not universally, agreed that in Indo-European there were two Voices: Active and Middle. ‘The active verb was used to present an activity proceeding from a subject outwards: when the event took place within the subject or was reflected on the subject, then the middle voice was used’ (Palmer, 1980, p. 292).

In Homer, second Aorist verb forms ending in -ην in first person singular are generally Intransitive Active, not Passive. Thus, from φαίνειν, *to show*:

ἔφηνα, *I showed* (1st Aor. Act. Transitive); ἐφάνην, *I appeared* (2nd Aor. Act. Intr.).

Most (about three-quarters) of first Aorists ending in -θην in first person singular are also Active Intransitive in Epic:

ἐφάνθην, *I appeared* (Act. Intr. in Epic); *I was shown* (Pass. in Attic).

This feature is still evident in some forms which are used in Attic tragedy with Middle force.

σύθην δ' ἀπέδιλος ὄχω πτερωτῷ. (A.Pr. 135.)

And I rushed off without my shoes on a winged conveyance.

σύθην has no augment.

Future forms ending with -σομαι in first person singular may still have both Middle and Passive force in the classical period. Passive Futures ending in -(θ)ήσομαι in first person singular, which were formed on the basis of first and second Aorist Passives ending in -(θ)ην, are largely a development of the fifth century BCE. (It cannot safely be maintained that -σομαι Futures are durative or Imperfect, whereas -(θ)ήσομαι forms are Aoristic.)

In the Hellenistic period, the Active Voice tends to supplant the Middle. In particular, Active verbs with Middle Futures now begin to use Active Future forms; thus, ἀκούσω for classical ἀκούσομαι. The Future and Past Aorist Tenses of the Middle Voice, which in the classical period were distinguished from the Passive, tend to disappear. Middle verbs with Active meaning now prefer Passive forms; thus, for 'he replied', ἀπεκρίθη replaces ἀπεκρίνατο.

References

- Gildersleeve (1900), *Syntax of classical Greek from Homer to Demosthenes* (Vol. 1), pp. 61–79.
- Moorhouse (1982), *The syntax of Sophocles* (Mnemosyne Supplement 75), pp. 176–180.
- Palmer (1980), *The Greek language*, pp. 292–293, 298–299, 302–303, 311–312.
- Rijksbaron (1994), *The syntax and semantics of the verb in classical Greek*, pp. 131–160.
- Smyth (1956), *Greek grammar*, §§800–821, 1703–1758.

EXERCISE 9

Identify all Middle or Passive verb forms (including Infinitives and Participles) in the passage of Euripides *Alcestis* 29–31, 42–64. (Do not include any parts of εἶναι.)

1. Write the line number in the left margin.
2. Write the form which appears in the Greek text.
3. Parse the form.

For finite verb forms, state the person, Number, Tense (of Indicative forms) or Aspect (of non-Indicative forms), Mood and Voice (indicating *whether* Middle or Passive).

For Infinitives, state the Aspect and Voice.

For Participles, state the Aspect, Voice, Case, Gender and Number.

Give the Imperfect Active Infinitive form of the verb (if the Active form does not occur in classical Greek, give the Middle or Passive form).

Give the English meaning of the quoted Imperfect Infinitive which is relevant to the context (not the whole range of possible meanings).

4. Montanari (2015), *The Brill dictionary of Ancient Greek* or the full edition of Liddell and Scott (1996), *A Greek–English lexicon*, should be used.

Example

πῶς δ' ἂν μᾶλλον ἐνδείξαιτό τις
πόσιν προτιμῶσ(α) ἢ θέλουσ(α) ὑπερθανεῖν; (E.Alc. 154–155.)

154 ἐνδείξαιτο 3rd pers. sg. Aor. ἐνδεικνύναι to show
Opt. Mid.

Euripides *Alcestis* 29–31, 42–64

Θ = ΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ

A = ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝ

Θ. τί σὺ πρὸς μελάθροισ; τί σὺ τῆδε πολεῖς,
Φοῖβ'; ἀδικεῖς αὖ τιμὰς ἐνέρων 30
ἀφοριζόμενος καὶ καταπαύων;

* * * * *

A. φίλου γὰρ ἀνδρὸς συμφοραῖς βαρύνομαι.

Θ. καὶ νοσφιεῖς με τοῦδε δευτέρου νεκροῦ;

A. ἀλλ' οὐδ' ἐκεῖνον πρὸς βίαν σ' ἀφειλάμην.

Θ. πῶς οὖν ὑπὲρ γῆς ἔστι κοῦ κάτω χθονός; 45

A. δάμαρτ' ἀμείψας, ἦν σὺ νῦν ἦκεις μέτα.

Θ. κάπαξομαί γε νερτέραν ὑπὸ χθόνα.

A. λαβὼν ἴθ'· οὐ γὰρ οἶδ' ἂν εἰ πείσαιμί σε.

Θ. κτείνειν γ' ὄν ἂν χρῆ; τοῦτο γὰρ τετάγμαθα.

A. οὐκ, ἀλλὰ τοῖς μέλλουσι θάνατον ἀμβαλεῖν. 50

Θ. ἔχω λόγον δὴ καὶ προθυμίαν σέθεν.

A. ἔστ' οὖν ὅπως Ἄλκηστις ἐς γῆρας μόλοι;

Θ. οὐκ ἔστι· τιμαῖς κάμῃ τέρπεσθαι δόκει.

A. οὗτοι πλέον γ' ἂν ἢ μίαν ψυχὴν λάβοις.

Θ. νέων φθινόντων μεῖζον ἄρνημαι γέρας. 55

A. κἂν γραῦς ὄληται, πλουσίως ταφήσεται.

- Θ. πρὸς τῶν ἐχόντων, Φοῖβε, τὸν νόμον τίθης.
Α. πῶς εἶπας; ἀλλ' ἦ καὶ σοφὸς λέληθας ὦν;
Θ. ὠνοῖντ' ἂν οἷς πάρεστι γηραιοὶ θανεῖν.
Α. οὔκουν δοκεῖ σοι τήνδε μοι δοῦναι χάριν;
Θ. οὐδ᾽ ἦτ'· ἐπίστασαι δὲ τοὺς ἐμοὺς τρόπους.
Α. ἐχθροὺς γε θνητοῖς καὶ θεοῖς στυγουμενούς.
Θ. οὐκ ἂν δύναιο πάντ' ἔχειν ἄ μή σε δεῖ.
Α. ἦ μὴν σὺ παύση καίπερ ὦμὸς ὦν ἄγαν·

60

This text is taken from *Intermediate Ancient Greek Language*,
by Darryl Palmer, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.